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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENTIANE 000360

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SUBJECT: LAO OFFICIAL ANTICIPATES RAPID RESETTLEMENT OF
RECENTLY RETURNED HMONG

REF: VIENTIANE 00225

Classified By: Ambassador Ravic Huso for Reasons
1.5 (B) and (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The senior Lao official responsible for Hmong resettlement told the Ambassador that the 837 Hmong returned from Thailand on June 22 had proper shelter and food available at their temporary processing site and would begin returning to their villages next week. He claimed that the Thai had notified the Lao on June 20 to expect approximately 600 returnees. The additional 200 plus were last-minute volunteers added to the return convoy from among the participants in the protest march. The official said he had been told by the Thai to expect another group of 600 to be returned after June 30. End Summary.

¶2. (C) The Ambassador, acting on behalf of several "like-minded" Embassies and UN organizations, met on June 25 with MFA Director General Yong Chanthalangsy, the senior Lao official charged with coordinating the resettlement of Hmong returnees from Thailand. The primary purposes of the meeting were to get the Lao version of events leading to the June 22 repatriation of 837 Hmong from the Huay Nam Khao camp in Thailand, and to press the Lao government to allow independent access to the returnees.

¶3. (C) The Ambassador asked DG Yong whether the returns were anticipated or whether they were the unanticipated result of the Hmong protest march from the camp that had been blocked by Thai authorities. Yong said that he had been informed by the Thai on June 20 to expect about 600 returnees. That number, he said, swelled by about 200 as a direct result of the protest march. According to Yong, the Thai officials had ordered the marchers to either return to the camp or board the buses that were staging to take the group of 600 back to Laos. When one of the Hmong leaders, Pa Moua, decided to board one of the buses, his example led many others to follow, Yong said. As a result, only the first 600 arrived in Laos with any significant personal belongings; the last-minute 200 returnees had little besides what they were wearing.

¶4. (C) As has been the case with previous returnees, the 837 were brought to the town of Paksane (northeast of Vientiane in Bolikhamsai Province) for processing in anticipation of their return to their villages or home towns. DG Yong said most were being housed temporarily in a secondary school and that there was more than adequate food, water, and financial resources to care for them. He said that the initial screening had been done to determine their places of origin,

and that perhaps as early as this weekend the government would start arranging their transportation home. The goal, he said, was to clear the Paksane facility by June 30. Soon after, the Thai were expected to return another group of 600.

Yong thought that only a half-dozen families would need to be resettled in one of the new villages established for returnees because they were either destitute or had been slash-and-burn farmers. All the others, he claimed, had families and villages to which they could return and be provided with food and shelter as they resumed their lives in Laos.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador strongly urged Yong to allow the international community access to the returnees both at Paksane and following their resettlement within Laos. He stressed that the lack of transparency and independent monitoring of the returnees was a serious concern to the U.S. and other countries. Yong, who has become increasingly willing to speak frankly, said he understood the U.S. position as did others in the Foreign Ministry. However, he said, he reported directly to two Deputy Prime Ministers: the Foreign Minister and the Defense Minister. Yong said that he had a difficult task of convincing the Defense Minister -- and others in the Politburo who were of the generation that fought the war -- of the utility and need for any kind of transparency. These officials were used to secrecy and took the view that the Hmong issue was strictly internal and, as a sovereign country, Laos had no reason to bow to international pressure. Yong argued that the decision by the Politburo several years ago to shift responsibility for the Hmong issues from the military to the civilians had already resulted in remarkable progress. He cited the recent

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surrenders of former insurgents, including a group of 54 last month, as evidence the new "clemency" policy was successful. He also claimed that current policies regarding Hmong returnees are working: specifically, resettling returnees in their home villages; allowing them to keep their cell phones; inviting the local and Thai press to cover returns; and posting photos and interviews on the internet. As a consequence, he continued, more and more Hmong in Thailand are becoming convinced that it is in fact safe to return and preferable to staying in the camps.

¶6. (C) The Ambassador urged Yong to consider additional, bolder steps his government could take to demonstrate to the international community that the returnees were safe and not subject to retribution or persecution. Ideally, this would involve monitoring by a credible, independent organization. However, other steps would help, for example, inviting the press (RFA, VOA, ABC, RFI, Al-Jazeera) to visit Paksane and report on conditions, or allowing diplomats or UN or NGO officials to do the same. The Ambassador added that he had been asked by other Embassies to inform the Lao of their interest in providing both short-and long-term resettlement assistance to the returnees. Yong replied that he would try to find opportunities to convince the Politburo to allow media access but thought that it would be "difficult" to persuade the leadership to allow diplomats to visit, "especially the U.S. Ambassador." He also said that he would try to sell the concept of resettlement assistance to the Foreign Minister. An assistance program could, he suggested, possibly include some form of "end use" checks that would not constitute formal monitoring -- a concept that the Lao rejected. He also stated that he would publicize the names of the latest returnees and their destinations (as he had done with smaller groups) and bring at least the local press back to Paksane to cover the status and condition of the returnees.

¶7. (C) Comment: DG Yong firmly believes that his policies will lead to the voluntary return of almost all of the Hmong currently at Huay Nam Khao by the end of the year. The Ambassador tried to persuade him that this was not the case. The only clear path to this objective has to include two

elements currently missing: a reliable screening process in Thailand to identify those with a reasonable fear of persecution and a transparent, credible means for the international community to verify the welfare of returnees. The Ambassador will continue to carry this message to other senior Lao officials, in coordination with like-minded Ambassadors. However, the Lao remain adamant that they will not agree to a truly independent monitoring program. Consequently, the challenge will be to identify mechanisms and actions that may fall short of this ideal but still provide the international community with some assurances that the basic human rights and welfare of returnees are, in fact, being respected by the Lao government.

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